

Old Treaties, New World

To reduce the nuclear danger, we must modernize arms control.

Sergey Rogov

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When the US Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, it was a surprise only for those who had not been following arms control developments in recent years. By century's end, the entire arms control regime we inherited from the Cold War came under severe pressure. One by one, practically all its components began to crack.

For six years the Russian Duma refused to ratify the START II Treaty. It will not ratify the new version of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, which Russia violated even before the adaptation document was formally signed. And during the Kosovo war NATO refused to let Russian inspectors verify the forces concentrated against Yugoslavia. Chemical and biological agreements are not being implemented. The Open Sky Treaty has been left hanging. India and Pakistan last year openly challenged the regime established by the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The Clinton administration plans to announce in June an American missile-defense plan, which would be in flagrant violation of the ABM Treaty. This announcement, coming on the eve of the Presidential elections in Russia, will probably lead to the immediate withdrawal of Moscow from the START I treaty. Right at the beginning of the 21st century the entire arms control regime might collapse.

The current crisis of arms control is explained in part by the widespread perception that arms control lost its importance with the end of the Cold War. The dominant view has been that international stability is endangered by the new threats: drugs, terrorism, ethnic

conflicts, and "rogue states" (like North Korea, Iran, or Iraq) that want access to weapons of mass destruction. But this assessment is misguided. The new threats, however important, have not replaced traditional challenges to international security. The collapse of the rigid discipline of the bipolar system, which maintained strategic stability during the Cold War, has not made it easier to maintain the balance of power. The old security mechanism is crumbling, but no new system to ensure peace and stability has yet been created.

The old power balance was based on the principle of Soviet-United States parity. Through an elaborate negotiating process, the two superpowers agreed on equal numbers in the main classes of nuclear and conventional weapons. The three other official nuclear powers were allowed to have 2 percent of the world total, and the rest of the world was prohibited from having access to nuclear weapons or sophisticated conventional arms. Different rules of the game for different players at each level of the international hierarchy ensured the Cold War stability.

This old framework is now being challenged at all levels. India and Pakistan have refused to accept the rules for "the rest of the world," and others may try to follow their example. And China is contemplating how to support its new economic capabilities with a corresponding military instruments. The asymmetry in American-Russian relations makes Washington much less willing to accept military parity with a weakened Moscow.

The Cold War arms control regime unraveled for two main reasons. First, the collapse of the bipolar structure of international relations undermined the principle of parity. Binary calculations do not work in the new system, which has a much more complicated configuration. China, France, Great Britain, and a few others are silent partners of the United States and Russia in the ABM Treaty modification negotiations. But no successful multilateral arms control deals were negotiated before the Cold War. The Washington Naval Treaty was no great success: it resulted in Pearl Harbor. And the multilateral arrangements that were negotiated in the bilateral system--the Nonproliferation, Chemical Weapons, and Biological Weapons Treaties--were about the complete prohibition of a certain class of weapons, and turned out to be difficult to implement and verify.

A second problem is the so-called revolution in military affairs, which is now official Pentagon doctrine. The application of new information technologies to combat will, it is said, establish total battlefield awareness. Thus it will be possible to find, track, and destroy with conventional long range munitions any target anywhere in the world.

Naturally, things will not happen quite that way. But precision guidance effectiveness instead of the number of weapon platforms is already becoming the decisive combat factor. ISTAPs and IDAMs

already becoming the decisive combat factor. JS TANKS and JS AIRMS, laser guidance and GPS were much more important during the war in Kosovo than the number of tanks and aircraft.

It turned out that the CFE Treaty didn't prevent a war in Europe, not only because it limits only some types of military equipment, but also because new long range weapons make territorial limitations for their deployment much less meaningful. These technological changes make "bean counting" (numbers of missiles, warheads, tanks, aircraft, etc.) much less important, because this traditional method of arms control does not include any limitations on the eyes and the brains of the military systems. In contemporary Pentagon slang, the key word now is C4SRI: command, control, communications, computers, surveillance, reconnaissance, and intelligence. The only arms control agreement that partially covered information collecting and processing capabilities is the ABM treaty, which limits the deployment and the size of ground based radars. And it is now under attack from the United States. Any new American missile defense scheme will deploy space-based sensors, whose capabilities are impossible to limit. Thus there will be no way to verify the hardware and the software of the future battle management system. That makes the restrictions on the number of ballistic missile defense (BMD) interceptors much less important, because if ten years from now the United States has a mature BMD battle management system it will be possible to quickly add many hundreds of additional interceptors to create "thick" territorial defenses.

This battle management system is not going to be limited to only BMD aspects. The Pentagon's revolution in military affairs is supposed to integrate all components of combat power into a system that provides the United States--according to Secretary of Defense William Cohen's 1999 *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*--with the capability to "maintain military superiority over current and potential rivals," including Russia and China. The Pentagon wants "full spectrum dominance," because "such a capability is the sine qua non of a superpower." Naturally, the United States is not enthusiastic about giving up unilateral advantages in the new military technologies, which nobody else is able to match. Of course, the goal of absolute invulnerability, or, as Cohen put it, "freedom to attack and freedom from attack," is incompatible with arms control at all.

The great danger looming over the horizon, then, is the failure to fundamentally modernize the arms control regime to regulate the power relations between the key players in the international arena. The main threat to arms control is represented not by minor nations, which have been labeled as "rogue states," but by the United States, which is, according to the Pentagon "the world's only superpower today and is expected to remain so through at least 2015." Russia, China, India, and

other major powers will respond to this challenge by greater reliance on nuclear weapons.

Because of changes in the balance of power and in technology, the old rules of the game have collapsed. If we fail to recognize this danger, we will not be able in the next century to preserve the relevant components of the old arms control regime and build a new mechanism for multilateral security.

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Reagan and Nuclear Disarmament

How the Nuclear Freeze movement forced Reagan to make progress on arms control.

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According to conventional wisdom, the nuclear disarmament breakthroughs of the Reagan era--the INF Treaty (which eliminated intermediate range nuclear missiles from Europe) and the START I Treaty (which reduced United States and Soviet strategic nuclear arsenals)--resulted from the Reagan administration's nuclear buildup of the 1980s. "We didn't listen to the nuclear freeze crowd," George Bush claimed in 1992, "We said 'peace through strength,' and it worked."¹ Some historians, such as John Lewis Gaddis, have adopted a similarly triumphalist tone. But former Soviet leaders, such as Anatoly Chernyaev, Anatoly Dobrynin, and Mikhail Gorbachev, have denied that they were overawed by American military might. So what does explain these nuclear disarmament measures? The evidence--including what I learned from recent interviews with Reagan era officials--indicates that President Bush and the other triumphalists are wrong. US government officials did listen to critics of the nuclear arms race, and the result was a major reshaping of the nuclear world.²

When the Reagan administration took office in January 1981, it had little interest in nuclear arms controls or disarmament. To staff its national security posts, the administration drew heavily upon members of the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), a hawkish group that had led the opposition to Carter-era nuclear arms control ventures. By November, 32 members of the CPD--including Ronald Reagan himself--had joined the administration. CPD member Richard Perle, the new assistant secretary of defense, told the press: "That we and the Russians could compose our differences, reduce them to treaty constraints ... and then rely on compliance to produce a safer world--I

don't agree with any of that." Indeed, as Reagan recalled, "there were some people in the Pentagon who thought in terms of fighting and winning a nuclear war."³ Reagan's personal qualms about nuclear weapons were offset by his virulent anticommunism and the hawkish military posture it entailed.

Even the new director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), Eugene Rostow, criticized the arms control process. The founder and chair of the CPD, Rostow characterized the nation's experience with the SALT I and II treaties as "painful and unsatisfactory," and defined the need to "reassess the role of arms limitation agreements" as his "first task."⁴

The Reagan administration commitment to a nuclear buildup and loose talk of nuclear war triggered widespread public anxiety and an outburst of popular protest. In the United States, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign drew broad public support and won backing from the Democratic Party. Antinuclear agitation was particularly heated in Western Europe. Focused primarily on US deployment of cruise and Pershing missiles in Western Europe (planned for late 1983) and Soviet deployment of SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe (which had already begun), massive disarmament demonstrations erupted. In nearly every West European country, antinuclear groups mushroomed into mass movements, and were supported by social-democratic political parties.

Naturally, the Reaganites were deeply disturbed. According to Thomas Graham, then a high-level ACDA official, the administration regarded the Freeze campaign as "a real threat." Robert McFarlane, the President's National Security Advisor, recalled:

We took it as a serious movement that could undermine Congressional support for the [nuclear] modernization program, and ... a serious partisan political threat that could affect the election in '84.... [A] measure of how seriously we took it is how much effort we put into dealing with it, ... a huge effort. Specifically, we organized an interdepartmental group that I chaired in the White House that included representatives from all the relevant agencies--from the CIA, from Defense, from the Joint Chiefs, from the State Department, from the USIA.... I said: "I want you people ... to get out from behind your desks and go to Atlanta, San Francisco, Denver, the fourteen major media markets of this country, and make a quota of appearances.... Everybody in this room and all of your deputies have to make at least four appearances within the next thirty days. And every place you go, you have to do four categories of appearance. When you go to Chicago, you have to hit four audiences: a college setting;

a drivetime radio setting; a civic group (an alliance, chamber of commerce kind of thing); and another talk show." ... It started in the spring of '82 and it carried on through ... about late spring of '83.

The administration was even more apprehensive about the antinuclear tide in Western Europe, and responded with a vigorous campaign of "public diplomacy." The USIA devoted considerable energy to explaining the reason for installing cruise and Pershing missiles and proclaiming America's peaceful intentions. And top US officials, including Reagan and Bush, fanned out across Western Europe to promote the administration's nuclear policies.

Administration rhetoric also changed dramatically. In April 1982, Reagan declared publicly that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." He added: "To those who protest against nuclear war, I can only say: 'I'm with you.'"⁵ In a June address to the German Bundestag, he touched on similar themes. The USIA director reported happily to the Secretary of State, George Shultz, that the "most compelling among the discovered attributes of a new Reagan image was his expression of understanding of the nuclear fears of the peace movement."⁶

While administration officials thought that their rhetoric would pacify antinuclear sentiment, conservative activists were less sanguine. The official campaign has been "moving the discussions away from our agenda to those of the administration's opponents," complained Terry Dolan, chair of the National Conservative Political Action Committee. "The administration hasn't co-opted the 'peace' movement. The 'peace' movement has co-opted the administration."⁷

Dolan's jeremiad was overdrawn. Reagan and other top officials fought hard to defeat the Nuclear Freeze, arguing that its adoption would deliver a devastating blow to national security. Sometimes, the President went further. In November 1982, he charged that "Soviet agents" had instigated the Freeze movement. The administration also ferociously lobbied Congress to defeat Freeze resolutions in the House and Senate.

STILL, THE REAGANITES *did* adapt their nuclear arms control policy to the antinuclear mood. During 1981, the Reagan administration formulated the "zero option": the negotiated withdrawal of all intermediate range missiles from Europe. Some administration officials have argued that this proposal--announced by Reagan on November 18, 1981--was cynically crafted to ensure United States missile deployment, for the Soviet Union was certain to reject a plan to remove its 1,100 missiles in return for a promise not to deploy US

missiles that had not yet been built. Graham claimed that the Reagan administration proposed the zero option to "make sure that those negotiations did not succeed, and the deployments would go ahead." Meanwhile, the zero option would soothe public opinion.

Though other administration officials denied that the zero option was designed to be rejected, all of them--including Reagan, Perle, McFarlane, Caspar Weinberger, Alexander Haig, and Edwin Meese--emphasized its connection to antinuclear sentiment. "My proposal of the ... zero option sprang out of the realities of nuclear politics in Western Europe," Reagan recalled, citing the demonstrations and antinuclear opinion. Perle, the author of the zero option, remembered that he had difficulty selling it to Weinberger, for the defense secretary wanted the US missiles deployed and, therefore, "was afraid the Soviets would accept it." But Weinberger eventually compromised, conceding, as Reagan noted, that the zero option would "put the Soviets on the defensive in the European propaganda war."⁸

Resistance to nuclear weapons also affected US policy toward strategic nuclear arms. By building a new missile, the MX, the administration intended to dramatically expand and modernize the land-based component of its long-range nuclear striking force. But Congress repeatedly rejected the MX missile plan, and the administration ultimately secured funding for only fifty of the two hundred MX missiles it proposed. Recalling the administration's frustration at the failure to substantially upgrade the US intercontinental ballistic missile force, Shultz lamented: "Given the political climate in the United States, we could not keep pace in modernization, production, and deployment of these deadly weapons."⁹ The resulting US weakness in strategic missiles heightened the appeal of an arms control agreement to US officials.¹⁰ Also, the Reaganites found that the price of Senate support for funding even the reduced numbers of the MX was a strong commitment to nuclear disarmament. Consequently, the administration opened strategic arms talks in May 1982, dubbed the goal a Strategic Arms *Reduction* Treaty, and adopted increasingly "flexible" negotiating positions. As McFarlane put it, "you had to have appropriations, and to get them you needed political support, and that meant that you had to have an arms control policy worthy of the name."

The Reagan administration also faced considerable pressure from allied leaders, battered by the storm of protest in their own countries. Weinberger recalled that "as more and more of the demonstrations were held ... more and more defense ministers urged that more be done" to secure a missile agreement. According to ACDA director Kenneth Adelman, West European governments "were nervous about their public, scared to death." They proposed all kinds of schemes, including scrapping the zero option and delaying deployment. The West German government warned George Shultz that there must be "a

real negotiation" over the missiles, "not just a show."¹¹ The Dutch government, convinced that it could not secure parliamentary approval of deployment, delayed action until 1985.

Starting in mid-1982, the combined pressures from the public, the antinuclear movement, and US allies had significant effects upon the administration's position at the INF talks. As Shultz recalled: "In order for the European publics to be convinced to go along with the deployment, they had to feel that there was an honest-to-God negotiation going on, a real and honest one. So, we conducted ourselves that way. We constantly wanted to be in the posture of being reasonable people--tough ... but ready to strike a bargain if one could be reached that was reasonable." Recognizing the growing desperation of Europe's NATO leaders, Paul Nitze, the chief US negotiator, went on an informal "walk in the woods" with his Soviet counterpart and suggested abandoning the US deployment of Pershing missiles in exchange for a reduction in the number of Soviet SS-20s. Although this formula eventually collapsed, at the end of December Shultz warned the President that "our allies could not withstand the heat of political pressure against the installation of our INF missiles unless we, at the same time, were advancing reasonable and stabilizing arms control positions." By March 1983, Shultz had convinced Reagan to shelve the zero option and propose equivalent missile deployment. When this compromise, too, failed to produce any results--and anti-missile demonstrations convulsed Western Europe--Shultz and the President grew rattled.

Convinced, in Shultz's words, that "we could not leave matters as they stood," the President decided to give a major speech in which he would talk about building a nuclear-free world. Although administration officials discouraged so radical an approach, Reagan ignored them. On January 16, 1984, he delivered a conciliatory address, declaring that the United States and the Soviet Union had "common interests and the foremost among them is to avoid war and reduce the level of arms." Indeed, "I support a zero option for all nuclear arms."¹² Although it is tempting to view this speech as part of the administration's propaganda campaign, a number of officials--including its writer, Jack Matlock Jr.--have contended that it was meant to be taken seriously by Soviet leaders.¹³

During most of 1984, the presidential election campaign kept the administration on the defensive. Richard Wirthlin, who drafted the Reagan re-election plan, recalled that he and other campaign strategists believed that public fear of nuclear war remained "a huge vulnerability" for the President. And "peace through strength" did not provide "the credibility we were hoping for." Indeed, during June, July, and early August, they considered the Democratic candidate, Walter Mondale--who championed the Nuclear Freeze--"within striking distance." Reagan adapted his rhetoric and activities

accordingly.¹⁴

Even after Reagan's re-election, the administration could not breathe easily. "Congress," the secretary of state warned Reagan, "will not support key weapons systems without meaningful negotiations. Similarly, allied support will be problematic if arms control efforts unravel."¹⁵ In response, the President reined in administration hardliners.

FOR SOME TIME, Reagan had wanted a summit at which he could meet Soviet leaders and promote a disarmament agreement. Thus, as McFarlane recalled, when Reagan had his chance to talk with the new Soviet Party Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, in Geneva in November 1985, "he couldn't wait.... He was eager." At the meeting, both men recognized that they could work with one another. In a joint statement, they made new proposals for INF and START treaties and repeated the now-familiar mantra: "A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

In 1986, both leaders pushed their recalcitrant colleagues toward a nuclear disarmament agreement. That January, Gorbachev proposed a program to eliminate all nuclear weapons around the world. To the dismay of US national security officials, Reagan welcomed Gorbachev's proposal. On January 17, Shultz told the state department's arms control group to get working "on what a world without nuclear weapons would mean to us" and how to obtain it. "I know that many of you and others around here oppose the objective of eliminating nuclear weapons," he said, "but the president of the United States doesn't agree with you, and he has said so on several very public occasions." Furthermore, "it's a political hot button."¹⁶

During the balance of the year, Gorbachev and Reagan swapped disarmament ideas and made plans for another United States-Soviet summit, at Reykjavik. Donald Reagan, the White House Chief of Staff, recalled that some of the President's advisors were opposed to the meeting. But "the President had been speaking out vigorously on disarmament," he noted, "and to temporize ... could have incalculable consequences in terms of world opinion."¹⁷ Although the Reykjavik summit failed to produce a disarmament agreement, each side recognized its appeal. Encouraging Gorbachev, the President told him: "Our people would cheer if we got rid of the missiles." Gorbachev, in turn, dangled before Reagan the prospect that, with some compromises on his beloved Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), he might become "the peacemaker President."¹⁸

The break in the disarmament impasse occurred in late February 1987, when Gorbachev--in response to the advice of antinuclear activists--

offered to separate negotiations on an INF treaty from the highly contentious issue of SDI. Notes taken at a Politburo meeting of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party in late February 1987 reveal that Gorbachev told his colleagues that "we should make a statement about untying the package on the medium-range missiles. This will be our response to the state of public opinion around the world."¹⁹ Gorbachev's action ended any possibility that the Reagan administration could retreat from its disarmament commitments. As Shultz recalled: "If the United States reversed its stand now on our willingness to eliminate INF missiles, after maintaining this position throughout the volatile predeployment period, such a reversal would be political dynamite!"²⁰ Conversely, the Reagan administration realized that a nuclear disarmament agreement would give it a substantial political boost. So Gorbachev's offer could not be refused, and the INF treaty was signed, with great fanfare, in December 1987.

The nuclear disarmament movement was delighted and claimed credit for the INF treaty, but many conservatives regarded it with fear and distaste. The governments of Britain and West Germany were particularly hostile. "I had always disliked the original INF 'zero option,'" Margaret Thatcher recalled, but "I had gone along with it in the hope that the Soviets would never accept." Ultimately, objections from these governments were overcome only by pressure from Washington.

In the United States, the outrage among disarmament opponents was more intense. In a full-page ad placed in various publications, the Conservative Caucus denounced the treaty as "appeasement." Robert Dole, the Senate Republican leader, declared, "I don't trust Gorbachev," and accused the President of "stuffing this treaty down the throats of our allies." During treaty hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Jesse Helms assailed the administration for "misstatements and ... misrepresentation." Shultz reported to the President that "the real opposition was all from the GOP side."²¹ Reagan, however, was unmoved by conservative charges that he had betrayed his principles. His only regret was that his other disarmament venture, the START I Treaty, was not ready for his signature before he left office.

The behavior of the Reagan administration does not sustain the thesis that these nuclear disarmament measures resulted from military strength. Although Reagan was more amenable to disarmament than many persons realized, he and other US officials made nuclear disarmament a top priority in response to pressure from antinuclear groups and public opinion. This pressure was both direct and, at times, indirect, as when Congress, anxious NATO allies, and Gorbachev--all influenced by the antinuclear movement--threw their weight behind a nuclear disarmament agreement. If strength lay behind these developments, it was the strength of public resistance to the nuclear

arms race.

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1 This article is based on printed sources and interviews with numerous Reagan administration officials and others involved in nuclear politics. For space reasons, citations for these interviews and some printed sources have been omitted. A fully referenced version is available at no charge. Write Wittner Footnotes, c/o Boston Review, E53-407, MIT, Cambridge, MA 02139.

2 The comments of Aleksandr Bessmertnykh at a conference in Princeton, N.J., in 1993, are sometimes cited to illustrate that the Soviet Union turned to nuclear disarmament thanks to American military pressure. But a full reading of those comments suggests a more nuanced interpretation. See William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 33-35, 74.

3 Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 257-58, 265, 267-68, 550.

4 New York Times, June 23, 28, 1981.